

WHY THE SILENCE?

Discussions of US-Russian Scientific Relations

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A very big story in US-Russian relations has attracted little attention from the public. And that series of events involves much more than just US-Russian affairs. That story is this: the largest scientific aid program in history was mounted right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a series of efforts that involved hundreds of millions of dollars going from the US, and other countries, to help science in Russia. Why has this unprecedented event remained so untold, so unremarked, so underanalyzed? It is true that several academic authors have studied and published on this aid effort¹, but there are few signs that the general

¹ Most recently, Gerson S. Sher, [From Pugwash to Putin: A Critical History of US-Soviet Scientific Cooperation](#), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2019. Earlier studies include: Glenn Schweitzer, [Swords into Market Shares: Technology, Economics, and Security in the New Russia](#), John Henry Press, Washington D.C., 2000; Schweitzer, [Experiments in Cooperation: Assessing U.S.-Russian Programs in Science and Technology](#), Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1997; Schweitzer, [Scientists, Engineers and Track-two Diplomacy: A Half-Century of U.S.-Russian Interacademy Cooperation](#), National Academies Press, Washington D.C., 2004. Graham, Loren and Dezhina, Irina, [Science in the New Russia: Crisis, Aid, Reform](#), esp. chapters 6-8, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2008; Irina Dezhina, [The International Science Foundation: The Preservation of Basic Science in the Former Soviet Union](#), ISF, New York, 2000;

public – not even the educated public – have taken notice. Why has this major, unique scientific aid effort remained largely hidden from our national consciousness?

Victor Rabinowitch did not shy away from difficult questions, so in his honor I will not avoid this one. Why the public silence on this effort to help Russian science, an effort in which Vic was a leader?

In my opinion, there has been a marked reluctance on both sides to recall what happened. In the United States if one of us involved in these programs starts telling an uninformed American about them we are likely to get the following sort of response: “You mean you spent enormous amounts of money trying to help our enemies, the Russians? How can you justify that in view of all the ways they have tried to subvert our elections, diminish the importance of democracy, and oppose the West in every way that they can?”

And in Russia our conversational companions will probably refuse to admit that Western aid was all that important, or maybe even refuse to admit that there

and numerous articles and talks by Harley Balzer, especially “Russia’s Knowledge Economy Decline: Views from Inside,” in S. Enders Wimbush and Elizabeth M. Portale, eds., Russia in Decline, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington D.C., 2017, pp. 113-161.

was much of it. They prefer to think that any recovery of Russian science that occurred after Soviet times was a feat of their own doing.

I can not answer for the Russian side, but let me make a few remarks about the American reaction.

If we are absolutely honest with ourselves we must recognize that there is a deep ethical and intellectual problem here. Why should Americans, acting either through private or governmental organizations, have given so much money to help Russian science, especially when our own society has so many great needs? Are, for example, Russian scientists more deserving of financial help than inner-city children in the United States, attending over-crowded schools with under-paid teachers?

In order to answer these difficult questions, it is necessary to recall the world situation in the early nineteen nineties. The Soviet Union had just collapsed, ending decades of Cold War in which the two major opponents had been locked in non-violent (barely), incredibly expensive, conflict for decades. Hope for a new era in which Russia might become “just another European country” was very much alive. The thought of a democratic peaceful Russia was enough to grab the attention of the world. Democratic countries do not wage war with each other.

Of all groups in Russian society, scientists were perhaps the most supportive of this idea of a normal, democratic Russia. Russian scientists, in contrast to many other Russians, had become accustomed to working with their Western colleagues, even during the depths of the Cold War. Scientific values about transparency and fairness influenced their political values.

Now that the Cold War is history, many observers have exaggerated the degree of its completeness. Many of my students think of the Cold War as a period when the two countries completely excluded contact with each other. Not so. Even during the worst moments in relations between the US and the USSR, such as the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, there were American scientists working in the Soviet Union and Soviet scientists working in the United States.

I was in Moscow as an exchange scholar during the Bay of Pigs invasion, and I remember debating with both Americans and Russians what the wisest choice would be if open warfare between the two countries would break out. Should we go down to basements in the hopes that American missiles and bombs would not kill us there, or should we stand in the middle of the street so that it would all be over quickly, with no personal suffering? The majority opinion seemed to favor the open street.

Because American and Soviet scientists had a Cold War record of working together, programs to build on those friendships seemed to make more sense than any other people-to-people efforts. Paul Doty, biochemist at Harvard University, once told me that when he got together with his Soviet counterparts during the Cold War to discuss scientific topics mutual trust was created that permitted them later to talk about more delicate subjects, such as arms control. Better science was a path to better politics.

There was, of course, a mixture of motivations among Westerners who wanted to help Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. All these goals were shared by all the groups, but to widely differing extents. The institution of democracy was particularly promoted by liberals. The creation of Russian capitalism was celebrated by business people. The diminution of the Russian nuclear threat and the stopping of proliferation was promoted by those interested in military affairs. The broadening of Russian scientific contacts with the US and the reform of Russian scientific institutions were goals of scientists.

Some people will say that the enormous effort made by Americans to help post-Soviet science was a failure. If one judges these programs by how much they improved US-Russia relations at the governmental level, this remark is probably correct. But the main goal of such science programs as the BRHE (Basic Research

in Higher Education), an activity in which many of us here were involved, was not to improve US-Russia relations at the diplomatic level. It was to help Russian science, improving its productivity by linking it more closely to research universities rather than the Academy of Sciences. The fact that the Russian government has now adopted this goal as its own is an illustration of the success of American efforts, not of failure.

And the American efforts were based on the assumption that better Russian science leads to better American science if the two can be more intimately involved.

The BRHE program was fathered by Vic Rabinowitch while he was vice-president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. It was a cooperative US-Russian program in which Americans and Russians worked together to strengthen research in leading Russian universities. This goal does not sound dramatic today, but the old Soviet pattern separated research and teaching, giving the universities a primarily pedagogical role. Recent history has taught us how research is best located in universities, not separate research institutes. Vic led in getting this concept accepted in Russia.

The recognition of the internationalism of science, based on the belief that the improvement of science in one country is beneficial to all countries, gives us

an answer to the question to critics who ask now “How could you have helped our enemies the Russians?”

The difficulty at the moment in answering this question is based on American politics. With regard to Russia, we are now in a curious position. Although the danger of all-out nuclear war between the US and Russia is not nearly as great now as it was at moments during the life of the Soviet Union, I would maintain that the situation on the US side is more partisan now than it was then. Strangely, it is more difficult to call for amelioration of relations between the two countries now than it was during the height of the Cold War. The polarization of American politics has infected our attitudes toward Russia. In the time of Vic’s major activities the views of the leadership of the US government and the US scientific community were more closely aligned than they are today.

Why is it more difficult for us to make an argument for helping (or having helped) Russian science now than it was at the height of the Cold War? In answering this question, context is everything. At the height of the Cold War there were two super-powers at devastating missile-point with each other and any kind of minimal friendly contact was considered by both sides as helpful. Science was the most logical kind of minimal contact, and science exchanges were favored by both governments. Now, the two sides are no longer at missile-point,

but they have different perceptions of what troubles our relations. The United States government is deeply disappointed that Russia did not come a “normal” European country after the fall of the Soviet Union, and is resentful of Russian interference in its elections. Russia is angry at the expansion of NATO to its doorstep and hostile about US sanctions. Neither country is ready to make war against the other, but that very unreadiness means that less significance is given now to small friendly contacts than during the Cold War. It is not believed now that we need to reduce friction between us nearly to the degree that it was during the Cold War, and therefore those of us who try to justify helping Russian science are asked in a more penetrating way than earlier: Why?

As Gerson Sher points out in his new book, From Pugwash to Putin: A Critical History of US-Soviet Scientific Cooperation, the claim that science is international is more a good-feeling slogan than it is a reality. Military antagonism, commercial competitiveness, and personal hopes for priority all get in the way of a truly international science. The arts (music, ballet, literature – or ping-pong?) may be more international than science. Nonetheless, the goal of making science international to the degree that we can is a worthy one.

It would be a good idea for us to stand back a little and think about where the US and Russia really are now. These two countries have many disagreements

and disappointments with each other, and I believe that Putin's Russia is more at fault than the US. Putin is an autocrat, securing his rule indefinitely, disdaining democracy at home and trying to destroy it abroad.

Nonetheless, if we were justified in trying to maintain scientific and cultural contacts with the Soviet Union, we are certainly justified in doing so with Russia now. The Soviet Union was a true rival, claiming ideological and economic superiority to the U.S. Russia today is a troublesome medium-rank power, with an economy ranking around 10th in the world. And yet it still has a large and talented pool of scientists with whom it is worthwhile to work, and who wish to have such cooperation.

If we allow the international contacts of science to wither to a lower level now than we did during the heights of the Cold War, we have failed in one of our most traditional goals, one that Vic so ably represented. So, onward with striving toward making science more international against all obstacles!